

Consumer Council News

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Our Newest Generation of Veterans

POW Outreach

The largest outreach in 20 years to former prisoners of war has been undertaken by VBA's Compensation and Pension Service. About 6,000 ex-POWs had been identified as never filing a VA claim. There were 4,600 identified and they were notified and invited to file new or reopened claims. As a result 1,153 ex-POWs nationwide filed new or reopened claims for disability compensation. It is estimated there are 39,000 ex-POWs living.

As the casualty figures approach 2,000 for Iraq, Secretary Principi has directed VA health care facilities to provide "priority care" to active duty service members involved in armed conflict in Iraq. There are upwards of 145,000 U.S. troops on the ground in Iraq. For these troops they have had to deal with nerve-racking sniper and terrorist-like tactics. To help track their health, the Pentagon is screening all returning Iraq War veterans. Within 30 days of coming home, all U.S. troops are required to fill out a questionnaire and meet with health providers.

Most of the severely wounded are evacuated to military hospitals in the Washington, D.C. area-Walter Reed Army Medical Center and National Naval Medical



We Care About Our Veterans

Center in Bethesda, MD. A VA hospital social worker and VA benefits counselor are assigned to work full time with patients and staffs to make sure each new combat-disabled veteran is aware of the health care services and benefits VA offers. Secretary Principi stated that "We will no longer wait for recently wounded servicemen and women who are struggling to overcome combat injuries to contact VA about care and benefits. Our policy, supported by new procedures is to reach out to them in a one VA manner that ensues we go the extra step to serve them."

The VA is making sure that none of the veterans of Iraq fall through the cracks and that they get immediate assistance.

Mandatory VA Funding

A bill pending in the House would provide mandatory funding for VA health care (H.R. 2318) the Assured funding for Veterans Health. Most federal health care programs such as Medicare and Medicaid are not subject to a discretionary process because their growth is calculated based on expected costs and funded accordingly. The bill would ensure mandatory funding for VA patients in categories 1 through 7 by creating an independent panel. The panel would determine funding based on how many veterans are expect to enroll each year and how much the care for each would cost. The funding level would be protected from reductions by the White House's Office of Management and Budget.

The discretionary funding so far for VA has

failed to keep pace with medical inflation and the changing needs of the veteran population as a result VA has had to forego modernization of facilities, put off purchase of much needed medical equipment and reduced staffing.

Congress would retain oversight of VA programs and health care services under H.R. 2318 and VA would still be accountable to Congress for how it spends its money and how it runs health care programs. The mandatory funding would create a more secure future for treating veterans in VA hospitals.

Newsletter sponsored by
VA Mental Health
Consumer Council
FAX comments to
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202-273-9069 or
call 202-273-8370

Online Newsletter
www.mentalhealth.med.va.gov/cc

VHA Task Force to Implement President's New Freedom Report

VHA was represented by Dr. Fran Murphy at the meetings of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health and since the reports release in July she has formed a task group to implement recommendations within VA.

For the first goal: Americans Understand that Mental Health is Essential to Overall Health, VA proposals included the following recommendations:

- ⇒ To reduce stigma VA will appoint a mental health liaison to its educational department to determine the best way to insert messages that integrate mental health into all educational activities.
- ⇒ Use VA Mental Health Consumer/Advocate Councils to get the Anti-Stigma message out. A booklet can be developed for use by the councils.
- ⇒ Develop suicide prevention protocol similar to the US Air Force for community based interventions.
- ⇒ Identify good working models of Mental Health/

Primary Care/Geriatric integration in terms of service delivery.

A second task force was charged with the goal of implementing a consumer and family driven mental health system in VHA. Some of the goals recommended were:

- ⇒ Implement a Family Education Program in each VISN which includes partnering with community mental health groups such as NAMI.
- ⇒ Develop a Peer Support Program as an adjunct to mental health services.
- ⇒ Develop veteran-consumer councils in each facility and insure they have communication to facility leadership.
- ⇒ Hire veterans as Peer/Mental Health Para Professionals in particular to work in the Compensated Work Therapy program and Vocational Rehabilitation.

VA and DoD develop PTSD Guidelines for Combat Veterans

Since 1998 VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) have been working to create clinical practice guidelines for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The project has developed 16 guidelines and hopes to complete the project by the end of the year. The guidelines cover prevention, diagnosis and treatment. Also included will be screening for PTSD symptoms, educating and preparing soldiers for traumatic experiences and trying to determine who would be at risk for developing the disorder.

The guidelines will help build a joint diagnostic and treatment infrastructure within the VA and DoD systems to catch those that have PTSD symptoms or are at risk of having them and treat them early.

There is still a stigma around the disorder and young people in particular tend to shun treatment.

This is a problem that develops after the experiencing or witnessing of a life-threatening event and can occur not only through combat-related stress but from disasters etc. Those suffering from it often relive the experience in dreams or flashbacks, have difficulty sleeping, and feel depressed, detached and estranged to such an extent that it interferes with their normal life.

In 2001 more than 77,300 veterans were treated for PTSD by VA. VA has 86 PTSD clinical teams, eight specialized inpatient units around the country, five brief-treatment units, 18 residential rehabilitation programs and nine PTSD day hospital programs.

The Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act (Public law 106-117) of 1999 provided support for new specialized PTSD programs.

Information and Resources

Some great resources are available through these technical centers:

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse

1211 Chestnut St., Suite 1000
Philadelphia, PA 19107
1-800-553-4539

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)
(Special Support Center)

Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-3042
703-524-7600
www.nami.org